

## **THE LEAD MINES OF AUSTINVILLE**

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Col. John Chiswell was an officer in the British Army, and a native of Wales. In the 1750s Chiswell was running an iron ore mine near Fredericksburg, Virginia. Prior to 1756 he was exploring the New River Valley in the area of present Austinville where, by tradition, he was hiding in a cave to escape pursuing Indians when he discovered lead/zinc ore in the dolomite rock. Chiswell was a metallurgist, and recognized what he had discovered. In 1756 Chiswell, in conjunction with Col. William Byrd III, opened up a lead mines (always referred to in the plural) at present Austinville. It is curious that no grant or deed was issued for this land at this time.

The status of the lead mines became complicated in 1758 due to the outbreak of the French and Indian War. The Commonwealth of Virginia felt obliged to make a treaty with the Cherokee, who had a dubious title to the land since their conquest of the Yuchi and Catawbas. The Cherokee's real hard-core territory ended near Knoxville, Tennessee, but to placate their pretensions to ownership of the New River Valley, which was also claimed by the Shawnee, the Commonwealth of Virginia signed a treaty with the Cherokee that guaranteed no development of the New River Valley. Chiswell recruited miners from Wales to come work the Austinville works, which were commonly called the "Welsh Mines". It is confusing whether or not the mines operated during this phase, as there was a law suit brought by the Welch against the mine operators for not honoring their employment contract.

History seemed to swirl around the lead mines. Due to the above-mentioned treaty with the Cherokee of approximately 1758, the Commonwealth of Virginia and the Colony of South Carolina jointly built Fort Loudon on the Little Tennessee River a few miles southeast of Knoxville, Tennessee. The Cherokee soon laid siege to the fort, which was garrisoned by the South Carolina militia. The Commonwealth of Virginia commissioned a relief force commanded by Col. William Byrd III, and he began a desultory march down the Valley of Virginia toward that end.

Byrd was obsessed with protecting his line of supply, and built forts along his route of passage. On the main road down the Great Valley of Virginia at the point nearest to the lead mines at Austinville he built a fort he named after his good friend Chiswell. He planned to build his next fort at the Long Island of the Holston, and to allow passage of his wagon train he constructed the military road known to this day as the "Island Road". His fort at Long Island he named after another partner of his and Chiswell's, John Robinson, Chiswell's brother-in-law.

The Treaty of Paris that ended the French and Indian War in 1763 required the British to withdraw all the settlements to the New River. This placed the lead mines, which are located on the western bank of the New River, in legal limbo. No land grant was issued for the mines, which at some point were abandoned.

The situation at the lead mines became even cloudier in 1766 when Chiswell became involved in a tavern room drunken brawl with a Mr. Rutledge, with the end result being that Mr. Rutledge was run through by Col. Chiswell's sword, and died. Col. Chiswell was taken to Williamsburg, where he was placed in jail. He was bailed out, went home, and committed suicide.

The Treaty of Paris gradually began to be ignored, and the lands west of the New River began to be resettled. At some unknown time the Lead Mines reopened.

In 1775 the Lead Mines were the county seat of Fincastle County, and as such was chosen as the site for the meeting of the regional Committee of Safety that had been called for by the First Continental Congress. As a result fifteen prominent men were chosen, and they drafted the "Fincastle Resolutions", which was the first document calling for "liberty or death" and a violent revolution against Great Britain.

At about this time the supplies of wood in the area had been exhausted by the demands of the lead mines for charcoal for the smelting of the ore. The county seat had to be moved to Fincastle so that the population could have access to firewood.

With the start of the Revolutionary War the Commonwealth of Virginia's Committee of Safety for Fincastle County assumed operating responsibility for the lead mines, under the direct supervision of Col. Charles Lynch of the Bedford County Militia. The mines were worked by slaves, and became a very important source of lead for the revolutionary armies during the war.

The lead mines being as important as they were to the revolutionary cause, Tories made attempts to capture or to incapacitate them. The most aggressive plan that the Tories developed was to capture the iron works at Lynchburg, the Lead Mines at Austinville, and to free the British and German prisoners of war at Charlottesville. Lynch was very vigorous in suppressing these activities, and he hanged a number of Tories without benefit of due process. In this manner the American English language gained a new verb, "to lynch."

The lead mines were visited by several famous people, including Thomas Jefferson, Andrew Lewis, and Daniel Boone.

Moses Austin of Connecticut married Mary Brown who was of a family that owned iron mines in Virginia. What connection his wife may have had to the Chiswell family is unknown. At any event, in 1789 Austin used the Lead Mines as

the basis for his successful bid to put a lead roof on the State Capital building. In 1791 he and his family moved to Austinville, which was named after him.

The Commonwealth of Virginia in 1790 sold the land mines at auction to the Austin brothers, Moses and Stephen. They were not issued a land grant for the mines, however. Interestingly, Moses' named his son after his brother, Stephen, and he was the Stephen F. Austin who became known as the "Father of Texas."

The Austins went on an aggressive business expansion, and are credited with having started the lead industry in America. However, they could not sustain their enterprises, and in 1791 the Commonwealth of Virginia granted to Charles Lynch (LO 24-151) 1400 acres, which included the lead mines. The body of the grant stated that Lynch "held this property in trust for the Lead Mine Company".

During the Civil War, the lead mines again became the major source of lead for the Confederacy. Lead pigs were hauled by wagons to the Virginia and Tennessee Railroad at Max Meadows, and were delivered to the ammunition factories at Richmond, Knoxville, and Chattanooga. The shot tower continued to be used to make round lead shot. Three and a half million pounds of lead were produced for the Confederacy by the Austinville mines during the war by slave labor. This was one third of the total used by the Confederacy.

In 1863 Union forces under Col. John Toland left Charleston, West Virginia with intent to destroy the Saltville salt works, the Virginia Tennessee Railroad, and the Austinville Lead Mines. Confederate Home Guardsmen ambushed the Union forces within the streets of Wythville, and Toland and many of his staff were killed. While the Union won the battle, the Union forces retreated without attaining any of their objectives.

In May 1864 Union General George Crook was dispatched from West Virginia to destroy the Saltville salt works, the "long bridge" of the Virginia and Tennessee Railroad at Radford, and to destroy the Lead Mines. Crook first moved against Saltville, but when he learned that it was defended by Confederate General John Hunt Morgan he lost his enthusiasm for that part of his assignment, and moved toward the long bridge and the Lead Mines. Morgan came after Crook and whipped him severely, and the Union forces retreated to West Virginia.

In December of 1864 Grant had Lee surrounded in Petersburg, with the Virginia and Tennessee Railroad being Lee's life line. Grant sent General George Stoneman from Knoxville to attain the customary objectives in Southwest Virginia. He bypassed Saltville, and destroyed the railroad as he came up its roadbed. When his forces attacked the Lead Mines, the Confederates abandoned them without a fight. The Lead Mines and all their associated facilities were burned.

During his withdrawal back to Knoxville, Stoneman destroyed the Saltville saltworks.

By March 1865 the Lead Mines were back in production, but Lee surrendered in April. Two days earlier, the Federals again destroyed the Lead Mine Works.

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Numerous short web articles